

Questions and Answers

Proposal to delist the eastern cougar

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has completed a review of the available scientific information about the status of the eastern cougar (puma) subspecies (*Puma concolor couguar*), which has been on the endangered species list since 1973. The review concludes that the eastern cougar subspecies is extinct. Although cougars are seen occasionally in the East, they are animals dispersing from the West or of captive origin.

1. What was the historical range of the eastern cougar subspecies? The eastern cougar range extended from Maine south to Georgia, west into eastern Missouri and eastern Illinois, and north to Michigan and Ontario, Quebec, and New Brunswick, Canada.

2. Why did eastern cougar populations become extinct? European immigrants killed cougars to protect themselves and their livestock. Many states offered a bounty to encourage the killing of cougars. Additionally, loss of habitat for the cougar's primary prey, the white-tailed deer, nearly drove deer extinct in eastern North America by the late 1800s. The last records of eastern cougars are from Maine (1938) and New Brunswick (1932).

3. Why are so many cougars allegedly seen in eastern North America? State and federal biologists annually receive hundreds of reports of cougars. Follow-up investigations have indicated that more than 90 percent are typically misidentified species of wildlife, such as bobcats, fishers, bears and deer, as well as house cats and dogs. However, a fraction of these are valid reports of cougars of captive origin or dispersing from the West. We recommend caution and notifying state and local wildlife officials when a cougar is observed.

4. How can I comment on the proposal to delist the eastern cougar due to extinction? Visit regulations.gov and insert docket no. FWS-R5-ES-2015-0001 to review the proposed rule and to provide comments within the 60-day comment period.

5. How did the Service determine the subspecies was extinct? The Service completed a formal review of the eastern cougar in 2011, examining the best available scientific and historical documents. We sent a questionnaire to all state fish and wildlife agencies within the range and contacted provinces in Canada. No state or province provided evidence of the existence of an eastern cougar population. We also created an eastern cougar web page to solicit public input. We could find no evidence that a population of eastern cougars survived in eastern North America other than the Florida panther subspecies (*Puma concolor coryi*) in Florida.

Service biologists assembled and reviewed more than 100 reports dating to 1900 that had high certainty of being cougars in eastern North America (outside of the Florida panther population). The reports described cougars that were captive and had escaped or been released to the wild, or wild cougars of the western U.S. subspecies that had migrated eastward to the Midwest. Finding no evidence that the subspecies exists, the agency concluded that the eastern cougar is extinct and began developing a proposal to remove it from the federal endangered species list.

6. Why did the Service list the cougar and write a recovery plan for the subspecies when biologists believed the subspecies was extinct? Reports of eastern cougars were scant from the late 1800s to the 1950s, but then sightings increased along with assertions by biologists, press coverage and other writers that believed there was sufficient evidence of the subspecies' existence. These assertions and sightings were accepted without verification, and coincided with a growing number of cougars in the North American pet trade. This led to the 1973 listing of the eastern cougar, despite a lack of empirical evidence showing that populations existed at that time.

In the 1982 recovery plan, Service biologists believed it was possible that the eastern cougar still survived in a few remote areas of its historical range. The Service's recovery plan for the eastern cougar called for at least three self-sustaining populations in the U.S., each with a minimum of 50 breeding adults.

7. What would the Service consider proof of the existence of an eastern cougar population? Even small populations of cougars, such as those in Florida, North Dakota and South Dakota, leave substantial physical evidence (tracks, photographs, scat, hair, genetic samples, road mortalities, cougars shot or caught in traps). There is no evidence that a breeding population of cougars occurs in the eastern U.S. or eastern Canada other than those in Florida (Florida panther).

8. Why are cougars occurring with increasing frequency in the Midwest?

Cougar populations in most western states have been increasing in recent decades. These are a different subspecies than the extinct eastern cougar. Cougars have reoccupied their historic breeding range in North and South Dakota and possibly elsewhere. While individual animals dispersing from western populations have been documented in a number of Midwest states, some of these animals could be released or escaped pets. Although young males may sometimes disperse hundreds of miles, female cougars normally do not move far from where they are born. Thus, cougars are slow to colonize new areas and establish breeding populations.

[The Cougar Network](#) documents cougar confirmations, many of them east of established cougar populations. According to The Cougar Network, cougars of wild origin have been confirmed from Minnesota and Wisconsin to Louisiana. Evidence of wild cougars dispersing farther east is extremely rare. A solitary young male cougar traveled about 2,000 miles from South Dakota through Minnesota, Wisconsin and New York, and was killed on a Connecticut highway in 2011. A cougar of unknown origin was also killed in Kentucky in December 2014.

9. Will the range of cougars continue to expand into eastern North America? Cougars once had the greatest distribution of any land mammal in North and South America. They are adaptable and can live in grasslands, forest, desert, mountainous regions and swamps. They require large contiguous areas with adequate large prey to meet their social, reproductive and food needs.

There are likely many places in eastern North America with adequate habitat to support populations of cougars. It is unknown at this time whether cougars will continue to expand their range eastward.

10. Since the Florida panther recovery plan calls for the reintroduction of populations in two locations outside Florida, could these cougars eventually populate eastern North America? The 2008 Florida panther recovery plan does call for establishing two viable populations of at least 240 individuals. However, the Service has not initiated plans for a reintroduction of cougars outside of Florida. If cougars are reintroduced into the Southeast in the future, dispersing animals could occur elsewhere. State wildlife agencies would have jurisdiction concerning cougar populations establishing in their state.

Though the Florida panther once ranged throughout the Southeast, it now exists in less than five percent of its historic habitat and in only one breeding population of 120 to 160 animals in southwestern Florida. While these cougars rarely wander outside the state, a Florida panther was shot in 2008 in west-central Georgia.

11. Will the Service consider reintroducing other cougar subspecies to eastern states outside the Florida panther's range? No. The Service does not have the authority under the ESA to replace the extinct eastern cougar subspecies by introducing another cougar subspecies.

12. Can private individuals or organizations reintroduce cougars to eastern states outside the Florida panther's range? If the eastern cougar is removed from the federal

endangered species list, the introduction of cougars to those areas would fall under the jurisdiction of the states.

13. What are the differences among the puma, panther, mountain lion, catamount, cougar and painter? These are different names for cougars. The different names are interchangeable and do not describe separate species or subspecies.

14. Has genetic analysis shown significant differences among the approximately 15 subspecies of cougar in North America? Recent genetic analysis has raised doubts about the validity of so many subspecies. But, a complete subspecies analysis, including consideration of morphology, unique ecological settings and habitats, and geographic distinctiveness between populations, has not been conducted. The Service will continue to accept the taxonomic description of 15 cougar subspecies in North America until a satisfactory subspecies analysis is completed and published in a peer-reviewed journal. While some biologists believe that genetic studies imply there is a single subspecies of cougar in North America, others believe that a complete subspecies analysis that also includes morphological, ecological, and behavioral considerations may document more than a single subspecies.

15. Is it legal to have a cougar as a pet? How many cougars are kept as pets? States have the authority to regulate possession, protection and hunting of species not protected by federal law. Some people estimate that more than 1,000 cougars are held in private captivity in the eastern United States. The Service's 2011 review accounted for 110 to 135 captive cougars in 15 of the 21 states surveyed, although it is likely that many additional cougars are kept as pets without authorization.

16. Do cougars pose a threat to humans and pets? Cougars attack and kill other animals for food. Cougar attacks on humans are extremely rare. Big cats are typically secretive and tend to avoid inhabited areas. However, cougars raised in captivity and released to the wild may be poor hunters and/or unafraid of humans. They may behave differently from wild cougars. We recommend caution and notifying state and local wildlife officials when a cougar is observed.

17. What is next? At least three independent scientific reviewers will be asked to review the proposed rule during the comment period. After the comment period is closed, the Service will review comments and make a final determination on whether or not to remove the eastern cougar from the endangered species list. That determination will be published in the Federal Register. The timing of these actions will depend on funding and staffing availability.

18. If the eastern cougar is removed from the endangered species list, will it be legal to hunt or kill cougars found in the historical range of the eastern cougar? State laws govern hunting and killing animals not protected by federal law. Contact your state wildlife agency to find out what laws apply in your state.

19. How many species have been removed from the endangered species list since the 1973 ESA was passed? Of the species for which the Service has the lead, 49 plants and animals found in the United States and U.S. territories have been removed from the list. Of these, 23 were recovered; nine animals were removed from the list due to extinction (although some were believed to be extinct when they were placed on the list); and 17 were removed for reasons such as the discovery of new information.